

2024 All-America City Award Application

Theme: Strengthening Democracy through Local Action and Innovation

Celebrate Your Community!

The National Civic League invites you to apply for the All-America City Award, the nation's most prestigious community award, now in its 75th year! This award offers the opportunity for both recognition and reflection. Applications require communities to come together to assess their strengths and challenges. The process of applying for the award provides an opportunity to mobilize local groups to work together and display on a national stage the people and projects that make your community a great place to live, work, and play.

2024 Award

As the 2024 elections approach, many communities are experiencing some of the same threats to democracy we see at the national and international levels, including polarization, economic inequality, anti-democratic activities, and racial and ethnically motivated violence. We are at a decisive moment in history, and strengthening and improving democracy begins locally. When people have meaningful opportunities to help make decisions and solve problems, they build trust, create a stronger sense of community, and help address important challenges.

The 2024 All-America City Award will recognize communities that are finding innovative ways to equitably engage community members in activities that strengthen democratic processes, like making it easier to vote, engage in community affairs, and serve in leadership roles.

Projects adhering to this year's theme include, but are not limited to, those that:

- Bridging divides across political, social, and economic differences
- Improving public meetings through innovative practices
- Undertaking reforms that give people a meaningful say in public decision-making
- Increasing voter engagement, participation, and education
- Reforming elections to be transparent, fair, and inclusive
- Authentically engaging marginalized and/or historically disadvantaged populations
- Removing barriers to participation in civic life
- Advancing equity & inclusion
- Using civic technology
- Promoting youth civic education and engagement
- Providing opportunities for civic leadership and participation
- Creating a stronger sense of belonging and community
- Promoting deliberative forms of public decision-making

All-America City applicants will be asked to discuss the strength of their civic capital—the formal and informal relationships, networks and capacities they use to make decisions and solve problems—and to provide examples of three community-driven projects or programs that have adapted and transformed the community. At least one of these activities must be focused on the 2024 theme – Strengthening Democracy through Local Action and Innovation.

The All-America City Award not only recognizes strong civic capital; it also honors the progress and innovation demonstrated through the cross-sector partnerships in the three project or program examples. It recognizes a community's courage to recognize its challenges, along with commitment to face those challenges with the same spirit exhibited in the highlighted efforts. It's about moving forward and getting the hard work done collaboratively, innovatively, inclusively, and with maximum civic engagement.

As always, eligible communities for the award include tribes, towns, cities, counties, and regions.

Deadlines and Submission Instructions

July 2023-May 2024: All-America City Promising Practices Series

Join the National Civic League for this series of monthly webinars. Learn about innovative programs and approaches to promoting civic engagement from All-America City (AAC) winning communities and other experts throughout the country. This series will also provide a chance for communities to talk with AAC winning communities about the benefits of AAC and tips for applying. See here for a [schedule of webinars](#).

December 14, 2023: Submit Letter of Intent to Apply

(Letter of Intent is not required, however, save \$100 on your application fee when you submit a Letter of Intent.) [LOI Template](#).

February 13, 2024: Submit Application

- 1) by email to aac@ncl.org by Tuesday, February 20, 2024, 11:59 p.m. PST as a **Word Document** without pictures (other than map) and file name with State, City 2024 AAC App and,
- 2) submit application fee of \$250 (*You only pay \$150 application fee if you submit a Letter of Intent to Apply by December 14, 2023) application fee to: National Civic League, 190 East 9th Ave., Suite 440, Denver, CO 80203 or call the office @303-571-4343 to pay via credit card.

March 2024: Finalists Announced

Finalists will be announced in March 2024. Finalists will be invited and expected to attend the awards event and competition in Denver.

March - June 2024: Competition Preparation

Finalist communities assemble a cross-sector community delegation to prepare a presentation about their community and its work for the June 2024 awards event and raise the funds to send their delegation to the June event in Denver. See resource page below for link to past AAC presentations.

June 7-9, 2024: All-America City Awards Competition and Event

Finalist community delegations present their story to a national jury of civic, local government, business, philanthropy, and community experts. All applicant communities are invited to participate in the June workshops and networking opportunities. During the event, finalists connect and share insights with peers, learn from national thought-leaders and gather ideas from the jury presentations and workshops.

Resources Available to You

All-America City Award Related:

- [The All-America City Experience](#): Brief informational video on the award program
- [Previous All-America City presentations](#)
- [Previous All-America City Award Event Program](#)
- Previous Applications:
 - [2015 Winner Tallahassee, Florida](#)
 - [2016 Winner Hayward, California](#)
 - [2018 Winner Longmont, Colorado](#)
 - [2019 Winner Dubuque, Iowa](#)
 - [2020 Winner: Rancho Cucamonga, California](#)
 - [2021 Winner: El Paso, Texas](#)
 - [2023 Winner: Mesa, Arizona](#)

Engagement Resources:

- [National Civic League's Civic Index](#) to help evaluate your civic infrastructure
- [National Civic Leagues' s All-America Conversations Toolkit](#)
- Asset-based framework--[Discovering Community Power: A Guide to Mobilizing Local Assets and Your Organization's Capacity](#). (Provided by permission of co-author John McKnight)

National Civic Review Articles on Civic Engagement:

- [Engaged Communities are Thriving Communities](#)
- [Hampton, Virginia: Civic Engagement as a Management Strategy](#)
- [Dubuque: Creating a Culture of Engagement](#)
- [Decatur, Georgia: Diversity, Gentrification, and the Art of Community Conversation](#)
- [Volunteers and Public Engagement](#)

Theme-Specific Resources:

- Civics Education
 - [Center for Civic Education](#)
 - [Citizen University](#)
 - [Generation Citizen](#)
 - [iCivics](#)
 - [Mikva Challenge](#)
- Dialogue and Public Deliberation
 - [Delib](#)
 - [Deliberative Democracy Consortium](#)
 - [NCDD](#)
 - [Everyday Democracy](#)
 - [iap2](#)
 - [Kitchen Table Democracy](#)
 - [Listen First Project](#)
 - [National Institute for Civil Discourse](#)
 - [Participedia](#)
 - [Thriving Together: Civic Renewal Conversation Guide](#)
- Equity
 - [Center for Community Change](#)

- [Center for Social Inclusion](#)
- [ColorOfChange.org](#)
- [esri](#)
- [GARE](#)
- [We in the World](#)
- [WK Kellogg Foundation](#)
- Public Participation
 - [American Democracy Project](#)
 - [BalancingAct](#)
 - [Cities of Service](#)
- Voter Participation and Voting Reforms
 - [ActiVote](#)
 - [All in Campus Democracy Challenge](#)
 - [Ballot Ready](#)
 - [Campus Vote Project](#)
 - [Fair Vote](#)
 - [Independent Voting](#)
 - [MYMOVE](#)
 - [Nonprofit Vote](#)
 - [Vote at Home](#)
 - [Vote Friendly Campus](#)
- Youth Engagement
 - [All In Campus Democracy Challenge](#)
 - [BridgeUSA](#)
 - [Campus Compact](#)
 - [Campus Democracy Challenge](#)
 - [Civics Unplugged](#)
 - [Project TEAL](#)
 - [Young Invincibles](#)

Community Information

Community name and state: Danville, Virginia

Your community is applying as a: ☐ Village ☐ Town ☐ Tribe ☒ City ☐ County ☐ Region

If applying as a region, name participating communities: Click or tap here to enter text.

If applying as a neighborhood, name city: Click or tap here to enter text.

Has your community applied before? ☒ Yes ☐ No If Yes, which years: 1977, 2020

Has your community been a Finalist before? ☒ Yes ☐ No If Yes, which years: 1977, 2020

Has your community been an All-America City before? ☒ Yes ☐ No If Yes, which years: Yes 1977, 2020

Contact Information

All-America City Award contact (primary contact person available throughout competition & follow-up):

Name: Amanda Paez Title (if any): Assistant to City Manager

Organization/Government/Other: City of Danville, VA

Address: P.O. Box 3300 City, State, Zip: Danville, VA 24543

Phone (business/day): 434-799-5009 Mobile Phone: 757-582-6960

E-mail Address(es): amanda.paez@danvilleva.gov

If named a finalist, your community will receive a complimentary membership (or membership renewal if an AAC application was submitted last year) to the National Civic League for one year. To whom should this membership be directed?

Individual's Name: City Manager Ken Larking

Organization: City of Danville, VA

Address: P.O. Box 3300

City, State & Zip Code: Danville, VA 24543

Phone Number: 434-799-5100

Email: klarking@danvilleva.gov

We agree to follow the National Civic League's rules regarding use of the All-America City Award logo, a registered trademark of the National Civic League. We allow the League and the All-America City Award to share this application and the information enclosed in it with League and AAC networks to promote the work of our community. If we are named an All-America City, we agree to conduct a post-AAC conference call or regional forum for the AAC network that features our projects. If named a finalist, we understand and commit to either raising the money or covering the cost of sending a community delegation to attend and compete in the three-day [Awards Event and Conference](#). In a pay-it-forward spirit, if named a finalist or All-America City, we agree to consider supporting AAC through a National Civic League membership for a minimum of the next three years.

Signature:

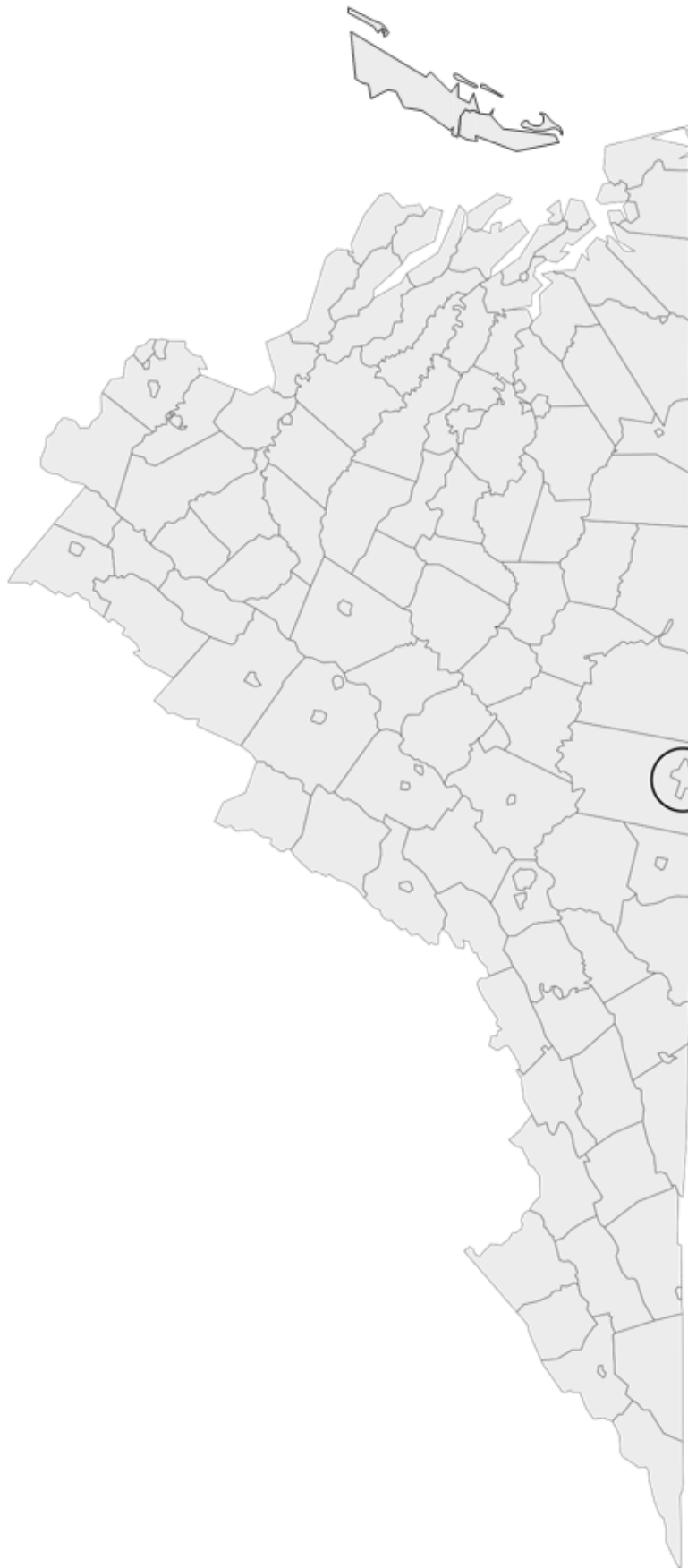
x 

Date: 2/20/2024

Name: Ken Larking Title: City Manager

MAP

Please insert a state map (8.5" x 11") with your community clearly marked. Include as an attachment if unable to insert.



DANVILLE, VA



Community Statistics and Map

Note: Use the most up-to-date statistics possible for your neighborhood, town, city, county, or region (source suggestions: [U.S. Census Bureau](#), State Department of Economic Security, State Department of Finance, Department of Public Health, and local school statistics).

POPULATION (most recent Census): 42,577

POPULATION PERCENTAGE CHANGE 2010-2020 (indicate + or -): -0.9%

Source/Date: Census.gov Quick Facts, 2/5/2024

RACIAL/ETHNIC POPULATION BREAKDOWN:

White	40.5%
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	4.9%
Black or African American	50.2%
Asian	1.4%
American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN)	0.1%
Mixed Race	5.5%
Other	0%

POPULATION BREAKDOWN BY AGE GROUP (percentages, if available):

19 years old and under	24.1%
20-24	6.56%
25-44	23.29%
45-64	24.98%
65 and over	21.05%

Source/Date: data.census.gov ACS Demographic and Housing Stats, 2/5/2024

PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES BELOW POVERTY LEVEL: 25.3%

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE: 4.4%

PERCENTAGE OF HOME OWNERSHIP 45.9%

Source/Date: Census.gov Quick Facts, 2/5/2024

WORKFORCE DISTRIBUTION—Name the three largest employment sectors in your community and provide the percentage of total employed in each:

Employment Sector 1: Healthcare/Social Assistance 19.4%

Employment Sector 2: Manufacturing 15.9%

Employment Sector 2: Retail Trade 14.8%

EDUCATION ATTAINMENT BREAKDOWN

Bachelor's Degree or higher 17%

Some college or Associates degree 34%

High School or GED 29%

Less than High School 13%

No schooling 7%

PART I: Tell Your Community's Story

What is something we need to understand about your community? Focus on the last ten years of your community's progress and development and describe how that progress has benefited your residents. Utilizing the awards criteria (below), describe how your community addresses its pressing challenges and plans for its future. Provide necessary history and background on your community to set the stage for the rest of the application. **(500-word maximum)**

Greetings from Danville!

Located in south-central Virginia on the border of North Carolina, Danville's history, economically, is one of a southern mill and tobacco town. However, you no longer hear the clatter of looms weaving cloth or the chant of the auctioneers selling tobacco in the World's Best Tobacco Market.

The collapse of both industries took place shortly after the turn of the century, leaving our city with double-digit unemployment, a high poverty rate, and many of its citizens with poor health outcomes.

Fast forward to today, Danville is a thriving environment for local businesses, industry, entrepreneurs, and innovators encouraging economic growth and job creation.

Economic development activity is as high as it has been in many years. Investments in industrial recruitment, retention and expansion through incentives and workforce development have led to over \$1 billion in capital investment and nearly 4,000 new jobs announced in the region since 2018.

Those numbers include a Caesars Virginia casino resort being developed in the city and the opening of Tyson Foods' new \$300 million, fully cooked food production facility that is the company's most automated poultry plant, marking the deployment of innovation pilots and prototypes at scale.

Also, in 2023, ground was broken in Danville on the U.S. Navy's new regional training center that aims to graduate up to 1,000 skilled workers annually in an accelerated training program for defense manufacturing, filling critical vacancies across the defense industrial base.

And, we are in our 13th year of implementing a development plan for the commercial and administrative heart of our city. This plan has led us to improve our streetscape, install new wayfinding signage, upgrade utilities, and add other amenities. We have stabilized buildings and then returned them to the private market for repurposing for commercial and residential uses. As a result, private investments are outpacing public seeding by four-fold.

Yes, Danville is undergoing a remarkable transformation. It has been labeled as the "Comeback City," and we are continuing to work for a better tomorrow.

In our quest to build a better future, we are committed to creating a city where all citizens can find opportunity, security, and quality of life. Our unique value is found in our commitment to unity, innovation, and progress. We are a city that embraces diversity and fosters a strong sense of belonging for all. We stand out as a place where residents, old and new, share in the promise of a vibrant and sustainable future. Our strength lies in our ability to create a welcoming and forward-thinking environment that enriches the lives of our residents while extending an open invitation to newcomers seeking inspiration.

In Danville, our promise is simple yet powerful: To be a city where unity thrives, innovation propels progress, and every resident, regardless of background or origin, finds their home. We are committed to fostering a strong sense of community and belonging, while embracing our distinct culture and welcoming future opportunities.

See why Danville feels like home!

PART II: Describe the Strength of Your Community's Civic Capital

Strong civic capital creates the capacity for inclusive, collaborative decision-making and problem-solving. Communities with this capacity have authentic civic engagement in which there is a reciprocal relationship among local institutions and residents for identifying and solving problems together. The National Civic League views engagement as more than presenting information or having people respond to questionnaires (though both are important); instead, we promote efforts that seek to listen to, and learn from, residents in ongoing conversations and leverage those insights to shape the way programs are administered, designed and executed.

We are working to set a different expectation for engagement. “We tried to engage ‘them,’ but no one showed up” is not a high enough standard. Engagement of racial and ethnic groups and others traditionally under-represented in decision-making conversations is not “going above and beyond.” It must become the new expectation, the baseline for legitimate engagement efforts.

Civic capital is composed of the qualities listed in our Civic Index: shared vision and values, culture of engagement, engaged residents, inclusive community leadership, embracing diversity and equity, authentic communication, and collaborative institutions. Communities that exhibit these qualities have the ability to maintain a good and equitable quality of life and to tackle difficult challenges like achieving good outcomes for all.

For this section describe the capacity of your civic structures for engaging residents and other stakeholders to help make decisions and create a stronger place for all people. Some factors to consider when describing your community's approach to community engagement include:

Shared Vision and Values

Does your community have a shared vision and strong sense about what people want moving forward? If so, what was the process to select your community vision?

Culture of Engagement and Engaged Residents

What formal and informal avenues and opportunities do residents from all segments of the community have to help prioritize issues and shape the community moving forward? (This could include city boards and commissions, among many other examples.) Does your community address difficult topics like race, immigration, drug addiction, etc. head on? Do government, nonprofits and other groups engage people in accessible, comfortable or familiar locations, and at convenient times for residents?

Inclusive Community Leadership

Does your community have a wealth of trusted, respected leaders across all-sectors and levels? Does your community have programs to develop leaders from all backgrounds, ages and sectors; particularly those from traditionally marginalized communities?

Embracing Diversity and Equity

How have groups (or the city) effectively engaged residents who have been historically left out in decision-making? What effective strategies have you found for engaging hard-to-reach groups? How does the community ensure that those most impacted by a given issue are meaningfully and actively engaged in identifying solutions and that these solutions help create more equity in the community? Have you taken steps to discuss, learn about, and help address historical barriers to participation, inclusion and employment?

Authentic Communication

Are there many local trusted, civic-minded sources of information and news? Do local government and other groups provide information through culturally-relevant and linguistically-accessible avenues? Does your community have authentic two-way communications between members of the community, the government and other institutions?

Collaborative Institutions

How do organizations and institutions in the community bring people together across dividing lines to engage with one another on key issues? Are their trusted organizations that serve as conveners and bring people together to resolve pressing conflicts and challenges? Are there regular, established opportunities for information-sharing and decision-making across various sectors?

Please use examples to illustrate the answers to these questions and be sure to mention the specific tools and processes you use to engage residents. *Note:* Please refer to the [Civic Index](#) materials in the resource section for assistance in filling out this section. (2,000-word maximum)

Building Social Capital

The story of key recent initiatives in Danville is one of harnessing civic capital that had long remained latent at best.

When the time came for the City of Danville, Virginia, to develop a new comprehensive plan in line with government mandates, city planners and council members resolved to embark on a development process unlike any they had employed in the past. Previous comprehensive plans—along with other types of plans drawn up by the city—historically failed to engage with the community in a concerted manner. From the community’s standpoint, at least, plans generally discounted whatever modest level of input community members might provide.

Members of the city’s large and well-established black community, in particular, felt disenfranchised by the city and often opposed to its seemingly unilateral planning decisions. These sentiments were hardened by the city’s long history of somewhat fraught race relations and polarization along ethnic and socioeconomic lines. Furthering a sense of distance between the city and many of its constituents, in previous decades the city had annexed a number of surrounding communities with the promise of improved services that never materialized.

City officials—and planning staff in particular—set out not only to rectify this situation but also to create a model of community engagement that would, first, yield a truly responsive comprehensive plan that all members of the community could support; second, establish a foundation for building long-term trust and goodwill; and third, build the muscle for robust, broad-based and ongoing community participation in the future. To do so, they would need to overcome deep cynicism and doubt. A \$200,000 grant from the Danville Regional Foundation enabled the city to proceed with its ambitious plan. To increase visibility and appeal, team members named the effort PLANDanville and developed lively, fun graphics that appeared throughout the city, including on high-profile billboards leading into and out of town.

Forging a Shared Vision

Community members themselves articulated the vision for what they wanted Danville to be. Literally hundreds of individuals contributed ideas and insights through a series of community events as well as workshops conducted at PLANDanville’s storefront space as well as outreach into Danville’s communities directly by a team of six community ambassadors—local individuals who had the trust and respect of other community members. The community engagement team parsed these hundreds of responses to identify the most frequently cited priorities and then submitted a limited set of options to a community vote. The community ultimately chose this statement: “Our vision is to create a welcoming and inclusive community where everyone can achieve their unique potential. Together, we will support and empower each other to build a sustainable and equitable future for all.” In addition to

the full-length vision statement, we also developed two other messaging cornerstones inspired by the community: a short form statement (“The heart to belong. The strength to become. The sense to sustain.”), and a credo:

“We are a city that has experienced much, endured much, and contributed much. At times we have played an economic and social role far greater than our size might lead one to imagine.

As we look towards opportunities that promise a new era of renewal and growth, we bring our depth of perspective, firm roots of resilience, and appreciation for our unique natural and cultural assets to bear on a shared vision for the future.

To fulfill this promise, we will embrace our diversity in a spirit of mutual support, recognition and respect. The warm, inviting community we foster will extend to every one of us who calls Danville home. And the fruits of our vision, manifest in our streets and schools, parks and businesses, homes and neighborhoods, will uplift, empower and strengthen the bonds between us all.”

These statements now introduce the Danville comprehensive plan.

Creating a Culture of Engagement

The PLANDanville team recognized the critical need to establish trust with the community at large. This meant (1) creating an identity and presence distinct from official City communications, (2) empowering a group of high-profile and respected residents to serve as neighborhood ambassadors, and (3) ensuring that community engagement team members put plenty of “skin in the game,” maintaining a consistent presence throughout the duration of the year-long effort.

To foster this culture of engagement, the community engagement team developed a five-phase process designed to involve the community in different ways. The first of these phases, “Share” provided a chance for community members to meet one another and start conversations about who they are and where they live. This phase, which went from January to May of 2023, culminated in a lively community event, “The Big Share,” which drew over 300 attendees. Other phases included Dream (Phase 2), which engaged community members in envisioning new solutions to existing issues, Explore (Phase 3), which turned to identifying specific goals and outcomes, and Draft (Phase 4), which solicited community members’ input into the writing of the comprehensive plan itself. A final phase, Go (Phase 5), is slated for spring 2024.

In addition to the cornerstone events scheduled for each phase, community ambassadors hosted 73 pop-ups with diverse individuals and community organizations to ensure the broadest and most inclusive levels of participation. A dedicated web site kept community members up to date on the latest developments and provided in-depth information about the project.

Inclusive Community Leadership

As noted at the beginning of this section, most residents of Danville would say that they did not have inclusive community leadership in many aspects of civic life, prior to the PLANDanville comprehensive planning effort and other recent initiatives in Danville. That is now starting to change. One of the community ambassadors is now running for city council. Another, the youngest of the six, is now more deeply engaged in the community on an ongoing basis. In addition, PLANDanville made a sincere, sustained effort to engage schoolchildren in the planning effort, encouraging them to develop a sense of pride and ownership in their city and its future.

Embracing Diversity & Equity

PLANDanville worked to ensure that individuals who historically had lacked a voice in civic initiatives were heard and respected. Community ambassadors were assigned to each of six districts within the city, canvassing them and creating pop-ups to ensure that all individuals who wished could share their views. At times, exchanges could become heated and direct: For instance, residents of Danville's historically black Almagro neighborhood, felt neglected in terms of basic amenities, protested that the new comprehensive plan would do nothing for them. To earn their trust and solicit their engagement, the City has held multiple meetings in their community with the intent of listening and authentic communication. These meetings have been attended by city staff, the City Manager and City Council members.

Authentic Communication

As noted elsewhere, through PLANDanville community members were encouraged to voice their views, no matter how strongly opinionated. Many channels were available for them to do so. They could speak directly with community ambassadors in the comfort of their own communities or at the PLANDanville storefront at 206 Union Street, in the city's historically Black downtown business district. They could leave messages on the PLANDanville web site, and they could comment on the social media channels established at the project's outset: A locally based media company, Kegerreis Digital Marketing, implemented a comprehensive communications strategy that included billboards, social media, emails and a purpose-built web site with continuously updated content. With real time metrics and analytics shared with the larger team on a continuous basis, Kegerreis was able to recommend updates and adjustments that boosted saturation and visibility wherever needed, ensuring that residents from every part of the city would take part. Driven in part by multiple social media postings each day, PLANDanville's web site and social media accounts garnered constructive engagement and feedback from some 13,000 unique visitors. PLANDanville set the tone for honest, equal-to-equal communication by consciously moving away from planning jargon to adopt a more friendly and informal communications style, which we called "kitchen table talk."

Collaborative Institutions

For the City of Danville's Planning Department, the many activities that comprised PLANDanville have helped to establish new levels of trust and fellow feeling with residents and city staff. So much so that

the decision was made to include various other planning documents under the umbrella of PLANDanville and its engagement process, creating collaborative activities for city staff. The outreach and engagement process for the Comprehensive Plan now provides citizens with the opportunity to comment on active plans for historic preservation, arts and culture, environmental and economic resilience and parks and recreation facilities.

The efforts to collaborate with residents has encouraged the city staff to follow the model and reach out to various departments in partnership for a more successful result. Staff is consciously starting to remove the barriers that we have created by working within our own departments. Department leads and supervision are now reaching out to other departments to create projects that are “city” projects not just department-based projects.

PART III: Describe Three Community-Driven Projects or Programs

Describe your three best projects or programs that have a compelling **community-wide** vision and have resulted in significant local impact and action planning within the past five years. Activities can focus on the full array of challenges facing communities; please refer to the application guidelines page for a description of this year's theme. **At least one of these projects or programs must be focused on the 2024 theme – Strengthening Democracy through Local Action and Innovation.**

The three **community-driven** activities are considered using the following criteria based on five components of the National Civic League's civic capital measurement tool, the *Civic Index*, plus a measure of impact:

1. **Shared Vision** and long-term plan to address local challenges defined by the community.
2. **Civic Engagement:** comprehensive resident engagement in decision-making and action planning. Strong engagement efforts are those that seek to listen to, and learn from, residents in ongoing conversations and leverage those insights to shape the way programs are administered, designed and executed.
3. **Inclusiveness and Equity:** intentional involvement of diverse segments and perspectives (ethnic, racial, socio-economic, age, sexual orientation, gender expression, people with disabilities, national origin, and others) in community decision-making. Evidence of increase in equity of outcomes for residents based on demographics.
4. **Collaboration:** cross-sector collaboration (business, academia, local government, nonprofits, military, etc.) and regional collaboration.
5. **Innovation:** creative use and leveraging of community resources.
6. **Impact:** demonstrable, significant and measurable achievements from the past 5 years (for example: increase in number and diversity of residents involved in engagement processes, reduced poverty rates, increased access to school health services, increased number of affordable housing units).

ACTIVITY ONE

Using the criteria above, describe the challenge being addressed, actions taken, and outcomes achieved through this project to date. (2,000-word maximum)

Police: Grass Roots Empowerment and Action Training (GREAT)

In the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police in May 2020, cities across the nation faced the thorny challenges of policing, poverty, and race. Danville was not immune.

Two years earlier, upon becoming police chief, Scott Booth recognized the need to engage the community, build trust, and develop a personal relationship with the citizens they served. So, he organized monthly community walks in neighborhoods, with officers – ranging from command staff to patrol – going door to door. Officers handed out cards with direct contact information.

“What I want is for people to understand the role of the Police Department, which is that we are here to help them,” Booth said. “And I want to talk with folks who normally would not call the police and tell us what their problems are. We can look at an area and say their issue is violent crime or speeding, but sometimes a neighborhood’s perception of crime is different than the way we look at it. So, I want to know what is important to them and how we can solve those problems.”

However, the killing of George Floyd added a new dynamic, one that called for a deeper understanding of the city’s most diverse and economically challenged neighborhoods. In particular, Booth wanted to immerse new officers into the community.

GREAT is born

With that goal in mind, Booth approached neighborhood leaders, including pastors and residents in these neighborhoods. Baptist pastor Joshua Hearne was one of those leaders.

“Oftentimes we think of peacemaking as something that is reactive after a conflict, but it’s easier and more effective to make peace prior to conflict,” Hearne says.

Led by Hearne, a diverse coalition of grassroots activists and clergy, developed a holistic approach with training modules that applied what Hearne calls asset-based community development principles to the complex intersection of policing, poverty, and racial dynamics.

With training modules established, the Police Department launched a pioneering initiative initially known as the Community-based Leadership and Immersion Program but since renamed Grass Roots Empowerment and Action Training. At its core, the program seeks to cultivate authentic relationships between rookie officers and community leaders, transcending boundaries of race, income, and identity.

“The heart of this is building relationships, because relationships are the foundation from which change is made,” Hearne says.

The program, which is four weeks of classroom and workshops that take place in between police academy graduation and field training, allows officers to hear directly from community leaders and residents about what matters most in their community. This creates familiarity between the officers and the citizens, and it reminds officers to treat each person as a human and not a problem.

Developing a holistic understanding

By empowering residents to identify and harness the inherent strengths within their neighborhoods, the program endeavors to shift the narrative away from deficit-based perspectives toward recognizing the potential and resilience of every community member.

And through immersive experiences and training modules, officers are equipped to perceive the positives within the areas they patrol, fostering a deeper understanding of the systemic issues underpinning societal challenges.

“We’re hoping officers will not tell deficit-based stories but will change the way they think about the neighborhoods and people they see in those neighborhoods,” Hearne explains.

The curriculum for the training modules not only delves into Danville's civil rights history but also facilitates meaningful dialogue within marginalized communities, addressing issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, and income disparity.

Program co-designer Ebony Guy, a community activist, emphasizes the importance of a holistic understanding, exposing officers to broader systemic issues such as food insecurity, domestic violence, and mental health support systems.

“A better understanding of these issues and support systems can help law enforcement de-escalate many situations,” she says.

The community perspective

The program's impact has reverberated throughout neighborhoods, fostering partnerships and mutual respect between law enforcement and residents. By fostering a culture of proactive engagement and problem-solving, officers gain valuable insights into the communities they serve, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and trust.

For Pastor Emmett S. Young III, one of the program's architects, the initiative symbolizes a shift toward inclusive collaboration, where community members and police officers work together toward a common goal of peace and prosperity.

“It certainly helps because community people want to be part of this, and they want the visibility of police, and they want to see who is on the police force,” Young says.

GREAT's success has been aided by local businesses such as Sam's Club, Target, Walmart, and Danville Toyota, who have become partners in the program through generous donations of money and supplies, underscoring the collective commitment to building a more equitable and harmonious community.

The policing perspective

In Danville, the program represents more than just a training initiative—it embodies a collective vision for a future where trust, understanding, and collaboration serve as the cornerstones of community policing, ensuring a safer, more inclusive environment for all.

"It boils down to recognizing the needs of our community, and it gives officers an opportunity to hear from community members," said former Police Capt. Richard Chivvis, who supervised the first classes in 2020 and 2021. "Police work is all about problem-solving and community service."

Four classes of new officers have now completed the program. Officers in each cycle of the training have taken to it with an enthusiastic level of engagement and have been eager to be out in neighborhoods meeting people and learning how best to serve the community.

Officer Sheila Hughes explains, "If you don't live the culture, you don't know the culture. I feel like it's going to help me on the street, because now I understand why people do the things they do, or what has happened to make them react this way. For someone like me who doesn't understand it, because I haven't lived it, that's what I'm taking out of this the most."

Familiarizing officers with the needs and assets of communities inspired the requirement that each class develop a service project. For example, the first class provided Thanksgiving dinners to residents of a housing complex. Another class established a system of school resource stations providing students with toiletries, shoes, clothing, and other items.

Adds another graduate, Officer Michael Cagle, "One thing that makes us different from a lot of other cities is that a lot of people here don't have the mentality of 'us versus them.' I feel like as a whole, here at Danville PD, we have the mentality of, 'We're all just one.'"

One of nearly 40 community engagement programs

Since the first community walks in 2018, the Police Department has expanded its community engagement programs. Today, nearly 40 programs operate, ranging from GREAT to Lunch Buddies, in which officers enjoy a meal with school students during their lunch period.

Here is a sample of the programs:

Buses and Buddies – Throughout the school year, officers visit the schools to greet students as they depart their buses. Students enjoy giving fist bumps and high-fives to officers and receiving stickers and supplies. It is a great way to get the day started for officers and students.

Community Overwatch – This program gets officers into housing complexes once or twice a month to reach people who would not normally want to be around law enforcement. The visits allow officers to bridge the gap. Teaming up with a local food pantry, officers bring fresh fruits and vegetables. The program has experienced a high reach, with up to 75 people attending.

Convenient Conversations – The purpose of this program is to quickly engage with shoppers at convenience stores. Officers answer questions and offer resources when available. This is a wonderful opportunity to meet with people who may have questions, but otherwise may not take the time to approach an officer or visit the police department to have them answered.

H.E.A.R.T. walks – This acronym stands for Healing and Engagement After Recent Trauma. With this program, command staff and officers, along with partnering agencies and organizations, go door-to-door in areas within hours of where a traumatic event has occurred. The purpose is to provide information and address concerns that residents may have stemming from the event.

Lunch Buddies – Throughout the school year, officers go and enjoy a meal with students during their lunch period, where they talk about the school day, favorite subjects, sports, and more. It is an excellent opportunity to address concerns that students may have.

Pass the Perspective – The program involves group meetings during which officers show their perspective while hearing the perspectives of the citizens. This includes educating citizens about personal safety, knowing their rights, what to do if police stop them, and more. An open forum discussion allows citizens to express their concerns regarding police. Citizens 18 years and older can participate in the MILO firearm simulation training to show how quickly officers need to act and make decisions on a regular basis.

P.E.A.C.E. Community Center – The acronym stands for Police Embrace Active Community Engagement. This is a police-operated youth and community center that provides a safe, fun space for young people to interact with officers and build relationships. The Police Department partners with a local agency to provide tutoring. The building once served as a police precinct.

Positively Pretty – This program was created to teach middle and high school aged females health and hygiene awareness while providing activities that focus on self-esteem and confidence building. The females attend once per month for six months before they graduate.

Youth Police Academy – The goal is to provide awareness of what officers experience in their day-to-day tasks. In a three-week period, each summer, children of ages 9-17 are introduced to each division within the department and activities associated with each.

Violent crime rates fall dramatically

Before Booth started as police chief in 2018, Danville's violent crime rates were the highest in the state per capita. For homicides alone, there were 17 in 2016.

In 2020, however, Danville hit a 35-year low in violent crime. Those numbers have remained at a low level since then.

Booth credits the turnaround to the implementation of community policing, which includes his introduction of three elements: a stratified model of policing in which crime trends are studied weekly and strategy adjusted as needed, neighborhood-oriented policing in which supervisors are assigned to specific geographic areas, and community engagement.

“When we do things out in the community on almost a daily basis, it’s about building trust and legitimacy in the community, so people will talk to you after an incident occurs, so we can solve crime together, and bring offenders to justice,” Booth told members of the City Council last year.

Police also focus on the children in the community to foster that trust at an early age through programs like the Youth Police Academy.

“It’s about relationship building in pretty much every type of engagement event we do,” he explains. “It shouldn’t be a photo op. It should be police officers and the community coming together to build those relationships, and I don’t think there’s ever a time that that is more important than with young people.”

Booth resigned as police chief in October 2023 to become police chief in another city. However, the commitment remains to community engagement with the promotion of Chris Wiles from deputy chief to police chief.

Community engagement “is something you will unquestionably see continue,” Wiles says. “That is something that has become a fundamental part of how we police.”

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ACTIVITY TWO

Using the criteria above, describe the challenge being addressed, actions taken, and outcomes achieved through this project to date. (2,000-word maximum)

Student voices on School Board poised to make a lasting impact on policy matters

Neil Shroff is a promising student-athlete at Galileo Magnet High School, one of two high schools in the Danville Public School System. He aspires to one day enter the medical field. In preparation for his career and to best serve the needs of the more than 5,500 students in the school system, he believes student voices and leadership matter as policy decisions are made.

“Our perspectives need to be heard in order for effective policy to be enacted,” Shroff says.

Today, Shroff is making his voice – and the voices of other students – heard as one of four students serving as student representatives on the School Board, thanks to a landmark moment last fall when the School Board ushered in a new era by appointing Shroff and three other teenagers as student representatives.

The move, spearheaded by School Board Chair Ty’Quan Graves, marked a significant step toward amplifying student voices within the district.

“It’s been a dream of mine, since I’ve been on the board, to have student reps to give our students a voice,” Graves says. “I didn’t have it when I was here, that’s why I wanted it.”

School Superintendent Dr. Angela Hairston applauded Graves’ vision for the engagement of youths.

“Student leadership and voice matter most because it promotes engagement, builds trust, and leads to equity as well as improved student achievement,” Hairston says. “Our youth have tremendously important thoughts about how we can improve their experience as students.”

She adds, “Policies, regulations, and practices impact the lives of students and their classroom experience. Having them at the table as school board representatives was a vision realized.”

The student representatives

The Danville Public School System has two high schools: George Washington High and Galileo Magnet High. As established by the School Board, the principal of each high school nominates two students from the school to serve on the School Board.

From these nominations, the school superintendent selects a student representative and an alternate from each high school, subject to final approval by the School Board. The student representatives serve a one-year term and must be a rising senior.

For Galileo Magnet High School, Shroff was selected as the representative, with Darrien Saunders as the alternate.

George Washington High, Kyra Alexander, a distinguished member of the school's color guard and a member of the National Honor Society, was chosen as the primary representative, while Jurnee Mitchell was chosen as the alternate.

As representatives, these teenagers act as liaisons, bridging the gap between the student body and the board, offering insights and perspectives crucial for informed decision-making. Their responsibilities include attending regular open meetings and undertaking assignments, such as research and data collection, as directed by the board.

It's a role that Saunders, who serves as an alternate, sees as important.

"I do believe that it's very important when you're making these policies to keep in mind who they're being made for and, you know, what better way to do that than to ask the people themselves," Saunders says.

And as student representatives, Saunders sees, as equally important, their role in sharing the decisions of the school with the general student populace.

Their roles

The student representatives serve in an advisory capacity and do not vote. Also, they do not attend closed meetings. The school division provides the meeting agenda and other public materials to the student representatives in advance of each open meeting. The student representatives do not have access to confidential information, including student or personnel records.

One student representative is expected to attend the regular, open meetings and complete assignments for research and data collection when scheduled by the School Board.

Since Shroff and Saunders from Galileo Magnet High and Alexander and Mitchell from George Washington High, began serving in their roles, Graves, the school board chair, has commended them for their positive energy and dedication.

For Danville, this moment signifies not only a step toward greater inclusivity, but also a recognition of the invaluable perspectives that students bring to the table. As these teenagers continue in their roles, they carry with them the hopes and aspirations of their peers, poised to make a lasting impact on the educational landscape of their community.

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ACTIVITY THREE

Using the criteria above, describe the challenge being addressed, actions taken, and outcomes achieved through this project to date. (2,000-word maximum)

Heart the Park

Maggie Richardson knows the value of parks and spaces to play in a city. She is the regional director of The Health Collaborative, which is a cross-sector coalition of residents and organizations that works together to make sure that everyone in Danville and the surrounding communities has everything they need to thrive.

“We know that parks are so essential to health and wellbeing,” Richardson says.

Neighborhood parks offer multiple benefits. Consider the following:

- They enable and encourage people to exercise.
- They provide exposure to nature, which improves psychological and social health.
- They provide opportunities for play, which is critical for child development.
- They help build healthy, stable communities.

Two years ago, however, the City of Danville’s Parks and Recreation Department recognized that the amenities at the 21 neighborhood parks in the city vary from park to park, and they may not meet the needs of residents in a neighborhood. For example, parks located in neighborhoods with older residents may need the addition of a walking area or walking trail. Residents in neighborhoods with young children cite the need for play areas or activities for different age groups.

To create park spaces that are more useful, meet neighborhood needs, and produce more community usage, the Parks and Recreation staff launched a “Heart the Park” campaign that brings residents into the park planning process.

The campaign ensures that the department better understands the amenities needed in the neighborhood, and that neighborhood residents will be satisfied with the end results long before ground is broken.

The campaign begins

On Feb. 12, 2022, the Parks and Recreation Department hosted its first “Heart the Park” community event. Doyle Thomas Park, located in a low-income neighborhood a few blocks from the downtown area, served as the site of the first event.

“We looked at each of our parks, and we felt we could make the most impact at this park,” Parks and Recreation Director Bill Sgrinia said. “This park is surrounded by a community with energy for renovation.”

To draw neighborhood residents, the event featured a scavenger hunt for hearts in the park, prizes, tennis demonstrations, participatory art display, music, s'mores, and a firepit. These activities were not meant only for play, but also to inspire visions for how community recreation spaces can be used to promote health, physical activity, community integration and family friendly fun.

Parks and Recreation staff showed residents illustrated examples of park additions or improvements that work toward goals that community members have already identified for the parks. Participants gave feedback and signed up to be a part of future planning activities.

City partners and local organizations co-hosted the event and showcased how they are available with support and resources for healthy living and community building. The organizations included the City of Danville's Police and Community Development departments, as well as the community organizations such as The Health Collaborative and the Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History.

The Police Department's officers assigned to that section of the city introduced themselves to residents in the park neighborhood, and members of the Police youth and community engagement team presented information on their services.

The Community Development Department presented information on various housing programs and services available to residents.

Representatives from the Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History constructed a living art project that literally created a "heart in the park" using stakes, yarn, and mathematics. Museum officials hoped that by collaborating with the parks planning initiative, they would inspire residents to envision more ways in which public spaces can be utilized for community art installations.

Two more "Heart the Park" events took place later in the month at neighborhood parks located in the western (Coates Park) and southern (Pumpkin Creek Park) sections of the city.

Engineering and design

Following the kickoff events in the three neighborhoods, Parks and Recreation staff continued throughout the year to share information and seek input on park improvements.

"People told us they wanted a place for their community to come together," Sgrinia said. "They want to have a place for a neighborhood festival. They want a multi-generational place where they can gather with their families."

In the Doyle Thomas Park neighborhood, for example, residents proposed new swings, sidewalks, basketball court renovations, event lawn, bike racks, and picnic shelters.

With new information in hand, the Parks and Recreation Department worked with teams from the landscape architecture program at Virginia Tech, a public land-grant research university, to produce park renderings and cost estimates of the resident-proposed amenities. The Virginia Tech group

created three visuals per facility to stimulate the public imagination about what possible renovation plans will look like.

In a presentation to the City Council, Sgrinia said, “We are excited about this process and the designs that are coming out of it. Community members have put a lot of time and thought into their parks, and we certainly appreciate their involvement.”

The projects are awaiting funding.

Adapting the project for use in other cities

Parks and Recreation staff say the key to replicating this campaign is to connect city departments and local and regional organizations for park planning.

What brought the “Heart the Park” groups together initially was a common goal of building an active citizen advisory network and reaching residents with resources through unconventional means. A series of events was organized and publicized to recruit residents to give feedback and attend meetings that would shape the future of their community green space.

Over the course of 3-4 months after that recruitment, resident meetings were held in and around the parks. As trust was built with residents and community leaders, the meetings became a meaningful space for residents to better know one another and talk about their community and the ways their neighborhood park fit into its function.

Initially, the important steps as organizers were to publicize the opportunities to be involved, build trust by showing up for communities, and have patience and perseverance in recruiting participants.

Internally, the process was documented to make sure it had support from leadership so that staff could be confident it could follow through on commitments to park designs and could respond to residents’ needs related to the parks but fell outside its jurisdiction.

Park meetings were designed in a way that partners could listen to residents for understanding and, at the same time, transparently communicate the abilities and limitations of the department.

Neighborhood park meetings are powerful because they connect individuals and resident groups with one another and with outside resources. Also, they act as a crash course in civic processes and resident advocacy. Residents truly lead the design process, and Parks and Recreation staff are there with professional knowledge to support them.

“We just want to be completely transparent about the process and invite people to be a part of it,” says Sgrinia. “We know that parks are so, so important to community members and that the things that make them really come alive and be loved is when they reflect the communities around them.”

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